Other voices

Diversity festival all about inclusiveness

By GLEN BRUELS and WILL TEMBY

As Socrates taught and as most educators agree, good questions lead to good, thoughtful answers. Last week's Gazette article about City Council's discussion of the upcoming multi-cultural festival asked the wrong question: "Should gays have a place in a festival celebrating cultural diversity?"

Instead, as members of the Colorado Springs community we need to ask ourselves: "Will this festival contribute to the economic vitality, business success, and quality of life for the current citizens of Colorado Springs?"

The answer is a resounding yes.

The multi-cultural festival will be held downtown in August; the festival will include dance, music, cooking and booths where organizations will share information about their programs. The goal of the event is to entertain and educate our community about the positive work and influence of the diverse cultures and individuals now contributing to the social and business structure of our city.

The festival is being sponsored by the Colorado Springs Diversity Forum, a nonprofit, private group of volunteers from local business, educational and community organizations. Started in 2005, the forum's goal is healthy growth for a vibrant Colorado Springs. To reach this goal, forum members welcome dialogue and the broadening of discussion within our community about how we will build this future together.

Forum members include many employers and businesses in the area (for a full list visit our Web site, www.cospdiversityforum.org). An urgent concern for these businesses is the ability to attract and retain the talent they need. Colorado Springs, and much of El Paso County, is experiencing a steady departure of younger, qualified workers from the region. According to the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment, from 2001 to 2004, our county lost 8 percent of its workers in the 25-34 age range — that's almost 900 workers a year. If we can make our community more attractive and vibrant for young people and others, we can reverse that trend.

The business members of the forum believe that this is the smart thing to do. To maintain a competitive advantage in an increasingly global marketplace, we need to tap into the strength that diversity in our community can provide. A study released in December 2005 by CEOs for Cities (a national network of mayors, business leaders and university officials who come together to tackle issues affecting the future of our cities) showed that cities such as ours can attract and retain younger workers by fostering an inclusive environment where individuals from all backgrounds can advance their careers.

Many organizations within Colorado Springs have already recognized the benefits of a diverse workforce. These organizations understand the benefits to productivity and retention of building an environment that allows each employee the room to thrive. They also believe that a healthy workplace requires an inclusive climate built on a foundation of respect for individual talents and perspectives. Unfortunately, this kind of progressive thinking seems at odds with the sentiments expressed in City Council last week by some of our elected leaders, a regrettable and growing disconnect.

The multi-cultural festival is not about singling out any one identity. It is about creating an inclusive environment where the people who already live here will want to stay. There is already a rich and vibrant community in Colorado Springs — the festival will help generate an appreciation for the diversity we already have in our community and foster a culture where all our citizens feel welcome. If others are attracted to our environment and want to add to the things going on here, that would be a positive step for the health of our community.

The Colorado Springs Diversity Forum has stepped forward to sponsor the festival in the hopes of encouraging a return to an earlier mind-set: we began as a frontier community where there was a confluence of many peoples. In the past, strong views were aired on all sides of issues, but people came together in the end to solve their problems. We are all part a community influenced by the founding vision of General William J. Palmer, who exemplified our tradition of openness and exchange among many peoples. We have always been enlightened enough to welcome talented trailblazers. Colorado Springs is a great place to live and work. We want to continue to be a place where each individual has the freedom to become the best he or she can be.

Bruels and Temby are co-chairs of the Diversity Forum Steering Committee.